
AMERICAN FLAMINGO
by Suzanne Frischkorn

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Acknowledgements

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for my father



Exilio

Conch shell pink, this sky echoes an ocean; a song weighted with pearls and sea glass. Mercedes, what did you make of Miami? Did it taste like sunlight on your wrist? White mariposa replaced by ribbon orchid. Jasmine, a scent of dreams. And flamenco? *Las Guajiras*? Castanets cast on the ground. Your granddaughter will seek you in a hundred mirrors. In Castile, in Cuba, she'll twine a history with silver thread. The ocean will rise up to whisper in her ear.

Spain at Leisure

Madrid

Cibeles drawn by wet lions. Mother
to three hundred ten trees.

Toledo

El Greco fools them all. Bougainvillea
spills down the granite hill.

Cordoba

Light's austere kiss brushes stairs— marble &
jasper flood the dark mosque.

Seville

Andalusian heat is flamenco red—
staccato etched on skin.

Granada

The verse citadel, nightingale's thrown notes
ghost Sacromonte's caves.

Mijas

The hibiscus village reigns in mountains—
white glistens, sol's dry heat.

Málaga

Feria littered, strung and lit— doorway
Picassos tilt today.

Torremolinos

Graffiti catenates every white wall—
bougainvillea currents.



Letra

I discovered Cuba chiseled in Retiro Parque.
Glimpsed Cuba second-hand, and Canadian.
Cuba in picture books, its myths tangled—
paper cigar rings, cigar box treasure.

Cuba, I will come to liberate you, I promised
and toasted "Cuba Libre!" with some Costa
Rican ladies, they laughed and laughed
and laughed, "That was funny," they said.

On the terrazzo— drank café con leche, took
dawn with Spanish sky. (I have yet to meet
a flamingo I didn't like and still the stork evades
me.) In Cuba, right now, someone conducts

a symphony of furtive braiding for a tourist.
She'll leave before the last braid is half-done.

Jasper

Oleander divides the highway like a rill, its blossom's spill their wan scent. We pass sunflower fields scorched by government light, and power line poles wearing large brown hats— no, not hats, stork nests. Listen to wind cut by wing. The way to Cordoba, *mi hijo*, is to follow the silver leaf of an olive tree as it drifts and loops along arid soil. First go to the sea, its bed of soft stones an alchemy for sorrow, its salt like baptism. Here, sunshine sends you to bed, pink oleander whisper the formula for everlasting life, and hope is forever caught in the almond tree. Jasper's opaque hues stain your skin; it's the myth you carry home.

Tourist

She'll leave before the last braid is half-done
and recall a store closed for her business,
the Nike articles she stripped off her skin
and the confectioners' sugar beaches.

Santiago, Havana? You don't remember
yet, the sting of her vacation chases you
home like an errant wasp. A constant hum
in either ear. She spoke of Cubans as some

speak of children, how sweet and how
desperate. "That was a stupid thing I did,
going to someone's home for braids." She
means the scent of fear overcame

the stench of poverty, it touched her white skin.
A moment longer... it may not have rubbed off.

Once I Dove into the Caribbean Sea

(Isla de Cozumel, '93)

Cuba, its tide strove to draw me towards you and failed. I departed with a smooth shell and wisps of surrogate sky. How cool marble caressed my bare soles, how heat plied my skin bronze. Not until I slide the silver bracelets from my wrist will the strains of your shore ebb.

Andalucía

A moment longer... it may not have rubbed off
the bougainvillea stain, its wine blossom. Rough
is the face of Serrania De Ron, and rough
the sand that spills from your palm. Darker

than expected, night over the Mediterranean Sea.
Strange to you these hot stars. White like Mijas,
and their ascent as hard. Had you known
would you still complete the journey? *No habla*

espanol, habla inglés, por favor? Qué hora es?
Time, we are speaking of time, how long
it takes a stain to set, a flower to blossom—
more than a morning? The acanto inspired

columns. And nothing you promise will
coax the palomas to follow you home.

Spanish

Speak its measured notes, recall the year long in paper,
the cargo ship's scent, a single rolling wave, the sailors—
tick them off your fingers, melodious. Listen, you can not
even name his brothers, and abuela's becomes a hymn,
Mercedes, Mercedes, Mercedes, a song to weed the garden
by, *Mercedes*—this is how we lose the language, how we
lose ourselves to myth, to legend, and how you find me,
with regrets only.

What I Know of Sugarcane

(In Cuba the annual sugarcane harvest begins when
the rural population bids farewell to the macheteros.)

The stalk, made of segments called joints, each joint
a node and an internode;
here leaf attaches to stalk,
here, find buds, find root primordia.
Despedida de los Macheteros! O national pride.
O solidarity. Here, a leaf scar
discovered when a leaf drops.
Farewell machete wielders: 44,000 men
in rubber boots, straw hats, gloves.
Buds: miniature stalks with miniature leaves.
Cuidado macheteros, struck stems spray hot syrup
on the skin. One bud presents
on each node; one side of the stalk
to the other. Men side by side between
dense blades. Loose rows of primordia exhibit
dark centers, caps, light halos.
Here, macheteros bear stems on their backs.

To the City I May Not Enter

(I sing to my beloved Cuba…
—traditional letra.)

Cienfuegos, pearl with the luster of a hundred fires, I swallow you and taste your heat; the scent of white mariposa its flue: pure and rebellious. A woman in a blue dress caresses my nape and wings traverse to kiss my ear. Where is José Martí, hero of Cuba? Where is his white rose? O to see a hundred fires burn among your thick stalks. Bay water beads on my heart. Light, bright as a stone. *Mi Perla del Sur, Mi Linda Ciudad del Mar.* Your palms render the rhythms of sun and gale even now as *contradaza* fills my mouth.

Seville

Coax the palomas to follow you home
with a one-two beat, conga as if the last
moment had arrived, your percussion pulse
at its end. Rhythm gets you everywhere—

your hips most. Flamenco's staccato
beat brands your skin, Seville
dares the moon to dance with stars.
The love letter hidden in your pocket

from where the palm tree grows, Suzanita,
read it again, smooth its creases—
Guantanamera, guajira Guantanamera—
your navigator, and your compass.

> Green, how I love you, green. Under the gypsy moon,
> things are looking at you and you cannot look at them.

Camagüey, Cuba

—legends gathered by rain, collected in *tinajones*, white lake reflections, plains and mangroves. That rooster of Morón, *el guapo!* Antonio, toss her, toss her in the air and catch her, not the first girl to trust you, yet the last. Seafarers, rebels, men who roam, all the silver coins of love— sing your death's song, its notes the breeze on a nape, its tale of lost things.

Isla Cerralvo

I pursue the women before me to a desert island.
The path skewed and scant.

The women left behind small songs—
De la Cisneros, Hughes, Velozo,

LeGrande, Navarena— born by oceans.

*

Two islands, from Cuba I've been exiled.

The other deserted, its sea mired in fishing
boats; its history steeped in coral reef.

La Dama Azul

(The Blue Lady, Jagua Castle, Cienfuegos, Cuba 1745)

This castle, *Nuestra Señora de los Angeles*, is nothing more than a sleepless sentinel. Restless, I note each wave of the Spanish Main and pace this fortress along its high walls. Only in the chapel do I discover solace. What is the nature of obsession? It is desire; desire for the return of your galleon, *mi amor, mi corazón*. I am almost invisible with longing. All that is left of me: a shadow of raw blue silk. This morning a young officer was found with his broken sword beside him, a skull, and a blue cloak. The guards claim I drove him mad.

AMERICAN

Granada

Things are looking at you and you cannot look at them,
lavender daisy, alone in a green sea, if you must drown
it is best to be lavender and alone. Here, in the General
Life gardens, morning glories bloom en masse. A visitor

wonders how exile fell on Moors, harbingers of water's
secrets, they who carved verses on their walls. You lose
yourself, or perhaps, wish to. Late summer garden
you have duende too. Leaving is difficult. Sometimes

to stay, invites death. I am speaking of the firing squad,
of having café with a friend on Monday, and learning
of his death on Tuesday. Come and see the blood
in the streets. I came to the source, seeking the shape

of my eye, my nose— I passed as a native, and at last
found a way home. I discovered Cuba in Retiro Parque.



Notes

In *Seville,* 'From where the palm tree grows,' is a line from Jose Marti's *Versos Sencillos*. The last two lines are a variation on lines from Federico García Lorca's *Romance Sonámbulo*.

In *Granada,* 'Things are looking at you and you cannot look at them,' is a variation of a line from Federico García Lorca's *Romance Sonámbulo*. 'Come and see the blood in the streets,' is a line from Pablo Neruda's *I'm Explaining a Few Things*.



Suzanne Frischkorn

Suzanne Frischkorn is the author of four previous chapbooks. Her honors include two Pushcart Prize nominations, the Aldrich Poetry Award, and an Artist Fellowship from the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism. An earlier version of *American Flamingo* was named a finalist for the Philbrick Poetry Award. *Lit Windowpane*, her first full-length book, will be released by Main Street Rag Press in autumn 2008.



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